

## How good are we?

---

When I hear today's parable, my immediate reaction is to think 'Boy, I'm glad I'm not like the Pharisee'.

Clearly, the Pharisee is arrogant, judgemental, legalistic and self-righteous, - in fact, it seems that he only just stops short of congratulating God on having such a good follower.

On the other hand the tax collector is humble and throws himself on God's mercy. The obvious conclusion is that the Pharisee is the bad guy of the story, and the Tax Collector the good. It's easy to think that this parable is simply about how we should pray: We do a quick self evaluation, from which the conclusion can so easily be "*Gee, I'm glad I'm not like the Pharisee*".

But if we do that, aren't we being just a bit like the Pharisee?

I remember my father telling me a story, which you've probably heard too - I know I've heard it from many sources and several times and in a few variations since I first heard it, but it makes for an interesting way to start thinking about what this parable means for us.

It so happened that there were two hikers, walking in the wilds of Western Canada, fully kitted out, hiking boots, rucksacks, the lot, when they came across a grizzly bear. The grizzly bear looked up at the two hikers, growled and began to come at them, teeth bared.

The pair ran, fast, but the bear pursued them and soon began to gain on them. Suddenly one of the hikers swung his pack off his back, sat down, rummaged through his backpack and pulled out his running shoes, and then began to take off his hiking boots and swapped them for his running shoes.

His friend looked down at him and said "Even with those shoes, you're never going to outrun that grizzly."

And the first hiker replied "But I don't have to outrun the bear - I only have to outrun you."

So, I wonder, do we really, when we get down to it, think that in order to be good followers of Jesus, we only have to 'outrun' the Pharisee?

On one side of this parable, we have the Pharisee:

We know the Pharisees. Over time they were variously a sect, a political party and a mainstream religious movement. In Jesus time, they were the biggest of the branches of Judaism, and after of the fall of the Temple in AD70, the pharisaic tradition was Judaism, and the groupings of Judaism we know today all come from that tradition.

Certainly, though, in Jesus' time the Pharisees were a political force to be reckoned with. They had long been the 'party of the people'. They were, as a group it seems, fearful of Jesus teaching and his increasing power. I think, from the New Testament, that we can be fairly certain that they were often self-righteous, intent on maintaining their position, and without doubt convinced that their world view was correct.

And that's the case for the Pharisee in this parable – and in using the Pharisee and the tax collector, Jesus is identifying characters who his listeners could identify with and relate to.

The only things we can know about this particular Pharisee, beyond the regular characteristics we might expect of a Pharisee is what we are told in the parable. So let's have a look – verses 11 and 12 – he thanks God he is not a robber, an evildoer, an adulterer or a tax collector. He fasts twice a week and gives a tenth of all he gets. So he lists some sins he doesn't commit, and then gives some examples of his piety.

So he ticks all the boxes for being good! Typical Pharisee, right? Do what you have to do according to the law?

Well, not quite.

Actually, he ticks all the boxes and then does a bit more. The law required fasting only on one day, not twice a week, and he gave a tenth of everything, even though the law (Deuteronomy 14:22 & 11:42) allowed for some exceptions to the 'give a tenth' rule. The Pharisee, in modern terms, 'exceeds expectations' as a Jewish follower of God

And yet he's the bad guy in this story.

Just ponder for a moment why this Pharisee is so bad again:

Not a robber  
Not an evildoer  
Not an adulterer  
Not a tax collector  
Fasts even more often than he needs to  
Gives more than is required by the law

He's not bad at all – he's actually very, very good.

I wonder how we would measure up against those things? Shouldn't we want, really, to be like the Pharisee?

On the other side, we have the tax collector. From what's in this short parable, we know even less about him than we do about the Pharisee, but, like the Pharisee, he is a character – an archetype – that Jesus' listeners could relate to, and I think we can, too.

You may remember a commercial on TV from a few years ago, where a group of people is happily having a barbeque, and someone says something like "So, David, what do you do for a living", and poor David replies "I'm a banker".

Everyone goes quiet. A banker? At a social occasion? But David seemed like such a nice chap.

Well, take the reaction portrayed in the ad and multiply it by ten and I think we might just about start to get an idea of how tax collectors were regarded in Jesus' time. They collected taxes, and passed those taxes back through a system which I suspect had more in common with network marketing than any tax system in place today, with each person taking his cut before passing the remainder to the next in the system, all the way to Rome.

And tax collectors had a reputation for taking a bit more than they were entitled to.

But even worse than just the financial aspect, tax collectors were Jews, and they weren't just working for the Romans, but they'd sold out to them – they were collaborating with them – so they weren't just regarded as thieves, but also as traitors.

So let's ponder why we think the tax collector is so good again - he:

Takes people's money,  
Is dishonest, and  
Is a traitor to his people

We wouldn't like to be thought of like that, would we?

And yet he seems to be the hero of the story. How does that work?

The Pharisee is bad because he boasts about being good! The tax collector is good because he is humble!

On the one hand the Pharisee is praying "God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."

On the other, the tax collector is praying "God, have mercy on me, a sinner".

So isn't it tempting to think "Boy, I'm glad I'm not like the Pharisee?" I mean, we're Australians, we don't like tall poppies, we don't like people strutting about big noting themselves, do we?

And then Jesus says "I tell you that this man [the tax collector], rather than the other [the Pharisee], went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted". Yes! Jesus agrees with us!

And so isn't it bit tempting to think "I'm glad we're not like the Pharisee!"

But if we start comparing ourselves to the Pharisee, if we come to the conclusion that we're better than him, then aren't we just making the same mistake the Pharisee did?

If we get down to it, don't we think - at least sometimes - that God is quite lucky to have followers like us? We've got good theology, well-structured worship, we support good causes, we encourage each other, we have good hymns.... We're not like some other churches, are we?

But as Paul tells us in Romans (3:23), "...all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God". The Tax Collector has done bad things and fallen short of the glory of God, but the Pharisee has done good, pious things and had also fallen short of the glory of God. They had both, in their lives, fallen short of the glory of God. But as Jesus tells us elsewhere (Mark 9:13), he did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.

And at this point it's interesting to note who Jesus was addressing when he told this parable – it wasn't his disciples and nor was it a huge crowd – the usual audiences we expect in the gospels, but verse 9 tells us, "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable". This was not subtle.

His audience was confident of their own righteousness, just like the Pharisee of the parable... but Jesus was telling them that they weren't justified before God.

As Paul says, "There is no one righteous, not even one..." (Rom 3:10, quoting Psalm 143 (David)).

This was not subtle at all.

"You're confident of your righteousness?" he says, "Well listen to this." And that's just how Jesus' word comes to us today – if we're confident of our own righteousness, if we're confident because we're better than others, then we need to listen to this too.

I think it's easy to fall into a modern interpretation of this parable which is something like "Anyone who is involved in the trappings of organised religion is like the Pharisee - you know robes, incense, using the old language for the Lord's prayer, rituals and traditions, conservative theology, conservative politics – well, that's like the Pharisees were, with their torah and their oral law and their fasting and everything.

But the fact is, if we start saying that we don't need to do this particular thing – say, kneel to pray. Or we don't need to raise our hands for the Holy Spirit to come upon us. Or we don't need to be as loud and emotional in our music like yet another church in order to worship God. Then we are falling into the same thinking as the Pharisee – that we're doing the right things, and at least we're not like them.

In fact, when you think about it, whenever we start comparing ourselves to others, we're being like the Pharisee.

And it's is such an easy thing to do, a very human thing: It doesn't matter how good or bad we are, as long as we can assure ourselves that we're better than someone else we can make ourselves feel better.

Did you claim few hundred dollars of dubious tax deductions? Not really so bad because some people cheat by thousands – or millions.

Sure, we might be relatively better than some others. Just like one hiker was relatively faster than the other; but we're never absolutely good through our own efforts. One hiker being faster than the other did not make him faster than the bear. If, once he'd left his friend to the bear, he'd be in trouble if he met the another bear, no matter what footwear he had on.

So, if we understand that we shouldn't be like the Pharisee, and even by judging him we're falling into the trap of being like him, what should we do? Should we aim to come to church and be humble – put our offertory in an envelope so others don't see how very generous we are, not singing too loudly and try not to boast about how frequently we pray?

These might well be good things to do, of course, but if they are, they're good things on their own. Doing these things doesn't make us justified before God – because doing these things doesn't make us humble, they are simply what humble people do.

I think there are circumstances where it's appropriate to point out others wrongdoing – but in doing that we shouldn't be congratulating ourselves. Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine – that is objectively bad... but it doesn't make us good.

From verse 14, "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted". In Jesus summation, what matters is who exalted himself and who humbled himself.

The Pharisee did the right things – the rest of the time – and the tax collector did the wrong thing – the rest of the time. But in their responses to God when they prayed, the Pharisee was wrong and the tax collector was right. And we should note that the Pharisee's response was wrong and the tax collector's response was right - the Tax Collector's response was *not merely better* than the Pharisee's – it was - absolutely - the correct response.

Jesus isn't condemning the actions of the Pharisee – the refraining from robbery, evildoing and adultery, or fasting and tithing. And neither is he saying the actions – the lifestyle – of the tax collector is acceptable.

We read of Matthew , who was a tax collector, being called (Matt 9:9) to follow Jesus... he was sitting in his tax booth by the side of the road, when Jesus came to him and said "Follow me" he got up and followed him, leaving the tax collection behind.

In the next chapter of Luke's gospel, we read of Zaccheus, another tax collector, who, when he turned to follow Jesus gave half his possessions to the poor; and returned four times what he had gained through cheating.

God's grace in Christ meets us wherever we are, no matter how bad we are – or how bad we think we are – but God's grace is not content to let us remain there.

We mustn't confuse our response to grace, the right response to grace, with what is needed to experience that grace. Because what is needed is only faith in Jesus – which leads to humility before God.

We need to avoid thinking of how good we are – particularly how good we are compared to others. We need to respond properly to God’s grace. To be obedient to God and to be his faithful servants.

The Pharisee had done what was required and more. But he was boastful. He was confident in his own goodness.

And no matter how good and faithful we are to God, no matter how sound our theology, how well structured our worship is, how generous we are with our money and time, how much we help the poor and oppressed, how much we encourage each other, how glorious our music is... we have only done our duty.

Those things are good. But even those good things can draw us away from being humble before God. People can become obsessed with good causes.

But they’re not things to boast about. As we sing in that great hymn ‘Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast save in the death of Christ my God; all the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to his blood.’

How good are we?

But I wonder what will our response to God be?

The Pharisee’s “God, I thank you that I am not like others!”

Or the Tax Collector’s “God, have mercy on me, a sinner”

Amen.